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Abstract

The idea of a makeover, especially an extreme makeover, is appealing because it suggests that there is always a second chance. In our discussion of Neil LaBute's 2003 film, three arenas of makeover are especially relevant: the makeover in real life, as television spectacle, and the remaking of characters in film. By now, most of us are familiar with the intentional upgrading of appearance. No matter how badly fate has dealt with our looks, experts can rework our bodies for the better. In contemporary society we have gone beyond changing hairstyles, makeup, and wardrobe; with plastic surgery, we can strengthen a man's jaw, shorten a woman's nose or make a child's ears less obtrusive. Liposuction and tummy tucks can just as readily change the contours of a person's body so that he or she will be more attractive. Why should good looks just be a matter of luck? And individuals try to make themselves over through diet, exercise and the skein of self-help books ranging from improving finance to meliorating social relationships.

Keywords

creativity, Pygmalion, makeover, art, morality, manipulation

Disciplines

Film and Media Studies | Other Philosophy

Comments

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Extreme Makeover: Art and Morality in Neil LaBute's *The Shape of Things* (2003)

Joseph H. Kupfer¹

The Makeover as Cultural Phenomenon

The idea of a makeover, especially an extreme makeover, is appealing because it suggests that there is always a second chance. In our discussion of Neil LaBute's 2003 film, three arenas of makeover are especially relevant: the makeover in real life, as television spectacle, and the remaking of characters in film. By now, most of us are familiar with the intentional upgrading of appearance. No matter how badly fate has dealt with our looks, experts can rework our bodies for the better. In contemporary society we have gone beyond changing hairstyles, makeup, and wardrobe; with plastic surgery, we can strengthen a man's jaw, shorten a woman's nose or make a child's ears less obtrusive. Liposuction and tummy tucks can just as readily change the contours of a person's body so that he or she will be more attractive. Why should good looks just be a matter of luck? And individuals try to make themselves over through diet, exercise and the skein of self-help books ranging from improving finance to meliorating social relationships.

Seizing the opportunity to market the transformation of ordinary people for a media audience, 'reality' television has packaged an array of makeovers as entertainment. Sometimes the transformation is relational, as in 'Who Wants to Marry a Multi-Millionaire;' sometimes the transformation is a matter of social standing, as in 'Charm School.' Shows that focus on upgrades in clothing and outer style include 'Queer Eye for the Straight Guy' and 'What Not to Wear.' More radically still, televised cosmetic surgery was provided in 'The Swan' (whose brief run ended in 2004). It seems that audiences devour the display of average individuals receiving - without particular merit and at the stroke of a magic media wand - a chance to start over, better than ever before. The typical makeover hues to conventional norms of beauty, grace and style. Writing about the show 'What Not to Wear,' Jennifer Pozner laments that women of diverse backgrounds are ridiculed for failing to conform to a single upper-middle-class, traditional and feminine standard of fashion and beauty (2010).

The ur-form of makeover television may well have been 'Queen for a Day,' which ran from 1956 to 1964. Some analysts characterize the dynamics of this landmark show as one of economic exchange (Weber 2009). The female contestants traded their tales of suffering and toil for a bevy of prizes that accompanied their transient, regal installation. The

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model of economic transaction persists in contemporary makeover shows in that participants still pay a price for their transformation, if not with ridicule or humiliation, then at least in the coin of public commodification.

Finally, we have the rendering of makeover in film. Besides the more general second chance themes found in such classics as *Groundhog Day* (1993) and *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946), movies have provided an assortment of characters who are reshaped outwardly, inwardly or both. To great comic effect, for example, we watch men become more sensitive and responsive because they take on the guise of women in *Tootsie* and *Mrs. Doubtfire* (1993). A woman becomes more confident and self-possessed as she acquires a formal college education in *Educating Rita* (1983). And a loutish teenage boy grows emotionally and spiritually as a result of his romantic friendship with a young woman in the somewhat sappy, but oddly effective, *A Walk to Remember* (2002).

Two films in particular stand out as precursors to *The Shape of Things*. The quintessential makeover movie, also originating in the theatre, is George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* (as well as its musical incarnation on stage and screen, *My Fair Lady* [1964]). The story is mentioned by Adam in *The Shape of Things*, who addresses his girlfriend (Evelyn) as 'Henry Higgins' in the course of being similarly refashioned by her. As with the domineering linguist, Evelyn reworks Adam in order to champion a higher calling. Where Higgins is trying to show the power of the science of linguistics, Evelyn seeks to exhibit her artistic prowess to 'sculpt' a human being by means of her persuasive talents.

The other popular film that is a plausible predecessor of *The Shape of Things* is *Pretty Woman* (1990). Instead of the nerdy Adam, we watch the attractive, but déclassé, prostitute Vivian Ward upgraded to feminine respectability. Even as Pygmalion of the Greek myth falls in love with his beautiful creation, Galatea, (revisited by Higgins and Doolittle), so does the wealthy Edward Lewis fall in love with the burnished hooker. Although Evelyn is not taken with the new Adam she has fabricated, her relationship with Adam appears at first to be in the Hollywood tradition of romantic comedy. It comes with the standard banter and courtship, watchful and rueful friends, and mini-crises. Many reviewers do construe the film as a variation on the time-honored 'battle of the sexes' genre. Frank Ochieng, for example, describes the movie as a 'black comedy relationship piece' (2003, 1394); Dennis Harvey sees it as a 'queasy investigation of male-female relations' (2003, 31); and John Petrakis finds that 'most of the first act resembles a standard romantic comedy' (2003, 42). It could easily be viewed as a jaundiced elaboration of an earlier film with the Adam-Eve overlay - *Adam's Rib*. In that story, Amanda and Adam are married lawyers who duke it out in the court room and bedroom with women's rights and power at issue.

Commentators are also quick to note how *The Shape of Things* inverts the quasi-romantic subterfuge of LaBute's earlier drama-into-film, *In the Company of Men* (1997). Thus does A.O. Scott describe it as a 'curdled parable of sexual cruelty - a kind of gender-reversed variation of 'In the Company of Men'' (2003, 53). A brief sketch of the structure of that earlier work will round out the cultural context of our analysis of *The Shape of Things*. In the first story, two men plan a sham wooing of some unsuspecting, preferably lonely, woman during their abbreviated sojourn at a work site away from their company base. Their avowed aim is to avenge the callous treatment they have received from women, thereby restoring 'a little dignity' for these past injustices as well as giving them something to 'fall back on' in the event of future feminine abuse.

Their plan soon pans out as they find a sweet, young deaf woman in the offices of their six week assignment. The competing cads separately wine and dine Christine in the expectation of dumping and hurting her. By story's end, however, things have taken an unexpected turn. The less assertive of the pair, Howard, actually falls in love with Christine, while the cocky and aggressive Chad remains aloof and smug. At the denouement, we discover, along with Howard, that Chad had been deceiving him as well as Christine. Chad's girlfriend had not walked out on him as he had told Howard. She is in fact sleeping in the adjoining bedroom when Howard unexpectedly drops in to discuss his feelings for the erstwhile victim.

The details of *In the Company of Men* need not concern us. What is relevant here is that Evelyn's domination of Adam reverses the manipulation and cruelty of the men in the former LaBute tale. From this angle, *The Shape of Things* can be viewed as the woman's parallel revenge story, punishing a man (the original man, Adam) who symbolically stands in for all the men who control and exploit women. A crucial difference between the two stories, however, is that Chad and Howard set out to toy with Christine's affections in retaliation for the alleged moral indignities visited upon them by women. But, as Chad confesses, he is really in it for the power; he manipulates and hurts Christine, he tells Howard, 'Because I can.' Evelyn's avowed aim is art. Although that could be an excuse for asserting her will over Adam or men in general, the story gives every indication that Evelyn does care about her art and views herself as an artist. Where men deceived and manipulated an innocent young woman in LaBute's earlier movie, Evelyn turns the tables by exercising a similar control over a man. But to leave it at that and understand the film simply in terms of an acerbic, female-dominated gender conflict would omit too much in the story that needs to be accounted for. By inscribing a strong moral theme within the romantic formula and gender struggle, LaBute actually transforms the makeover movie itself, a meta-makeover of sorts. He does so by raising profound questions concerning the relationship between art and morality.

Art and Morality

Woven through the story of Evelyn's ever-encompassing makeover of Adam are multi-layered relationships between art and morality. Among these is the relative importance of the moral versus the aesthetic. One traditional and influential way of thinking is to view the moral as taking precedence over other domains of value, such as the economic, social, personal or artistic. Yet such elevation of the moral likely needs to be qualified. For surely a small malfeasance or harm, such as a minor lie or broken promise, can be justified by a very great economic, personal or artistic gain. We would seem to be warranted in lying about our vacation in order to preserve our friendship, for example, or save Rembrandt's 'Nightwatch.' So, we cannot say in blanket fashion that moral values necessarily override all others. A more tempered, flexible view might be that morality takes priority over other considerations unless the other goods obviously exceed the moral costs or gains by a decisive margin.

The Shape of Things encourages us to reflect on the relative importance of the moral versus the artistic by virtue of the strong stance taken by Evelyn. She reverses the standard conception, explicitly rejecting virtually all moral claims in favor of the creation of art. One commentator, in fact, attributes to LaBute himself the view that art transcends and thereby precludes moral concerns. Nick Schager writes that Evelyn is the film's hero because 'she's the only one who accepts Labute's trite theory that 'Moralists have no place in an art gallery' [proclaimed in a banner at Evelyn's M.F.A. defense]' (2003, 581). Schager proceeds to argue that 'the film champions the ideas that the nature of art itself-good or bad, mean or kind, manipulative or suggestive-is that it is beyond [moral] reproach' (2003, 581). The reviewer thinks that by these means LaBute is trying to defend himself against critics who took him to task for the caustic love relations depicted in *In the Company of Men*.

Although the view that art is beyond the reach of the moral is certainly Evelyn's, why uncritically and simplistically attribute it to LaBute or his film? Just as LaBute himself does not, on my understanding, endorse the nasty conniving of the men depicted in *In the Company of Men*, neither does he side with Evelyn. Instead, he provokes us to investigate the multi-faceted interplay between art and morality. After all, a film that contains the assertion that moralists have no place in an art gallery cannot truly mean to exclude moral judgment or value from art upon pain of self-contradiction. The numerous literary references that punctuate the story prepare us to see narrative as a self-reflexive trope of the film. These references point to at least two things: the importance of the moral content found in particular works of art and the moral significance of narrative itself. Many of the literary allusions are made by Adam, as with his Higgins jest, reminding us that he is an English major. Nevertheless, something more seems at stake. Consider several of the literary gems that are privileged in the story: *The*

Picture of Dorian Gray. (Wilde), Shakespeare's *Othello*, *Metamorphosis* (Kafka), the *Medea* of Euripides and the biblical account of Adam and Eve. Immoral behavior is central to each of these stories, suggesting that moral concerns are an inescapable dimension of virtually any narrative. We will explore the moral resonances for *The Shape of Things* as we analyze the film in depth, but a word or two about *Genesis* might be helpful here.

The Garden of Eden may well be the literary *locus classicus* for the battle between the sexes. With Evelyn's name naturally heard as an elongation of 'Eve,' LaBute echoes the biblical story in Evelyn's control of her latter-day Adam. Taking her cue from God, who created man from clay, Evelyn molds her Adam, not in her own image of course, but in the image of the man she (allegedly) would like Adam to be - according to her own design, so to speak. As we will see, Evelyn believes that the artist's work is divine, beyond considerations of morality. More patently, Evelyn resembles Eve in leading her man astray. While the Eve of Genesis tempts her Adam with fruit from the tree of knowledge, Evelyn manipulates her contemporary Adam with her very sensual self. Evelyn twists and turns and reshapes Adam by exciting and controlling his desire for her.

Each woman works her wiles on the man in order to realize a transcendent good. Evelyn remakes her frumpy Adam for the sake of art, just as Eve persuades Adam to disobey God in order to acquire knowledge. The parallels include each man's loss of innocence through self-consciousness, especially about sexuality, and shame. Breaking God's commandment and expulsion from paradise, moreover, are obviously fraught with moral turpitude. In a similar vein, Evelyn argues that the improvement in Adam's outward appearance is accompanied by morally tainted behaviour.

The pride that Evelyn shares with the biblical Eve is also informed by art in *The Shape of Things*. Evelyn's moral vice has a distinctively aesthetic scope in that Evelyn believes her taste in artistic matters is superior to everyone else's. In the character of Evelyn, then, LaBute has proven himself to be an ironic Pygmalion, creating someone who suffers from a kind of aesthetic hubris: a vice that is moral but shaped by aesthetic perception.

Narrative is also morally relevant as the implicit framework of Evelyn's scheme to refashion Adam. We see that Evelyn is imposing her narrative of their relationship on Adam, including its status as an art project. Even though Evelyn sees herself as a sculptor, using a real person as her medium, she works from a narrative of what Adam will become, including what their relationship does or does not amount to. We might consider this the pragmatics of narrativity: the narrative dimension of deliberation and action. The narrative of Adam's makeover which first serves as Evelyn's action-plan will eventually be the substance of her public presentation for her M.F.A. project.

The pragmatics of narrativity can also have a social component, in that Evelyn is simultaneously encouraging Adam to create a more favorable, albeit deluded, narrative of his own. Just as Christine was weaving a romantic story (a 'romance') of her relationship with Chad in *In the Company of Men*, Chad was orchestrating his narrative of humiliation. Relationships can be gauged, then, by the extent to which the stories of the people in the relationship jibe or fail to converge. When the stories diverge, moreover, we can ask whether one of the parties is morally responsible for the disparity and subsequent painful disillusionment of the other person.

Lastly, we have the moral salience of narrative for LaBute's own work. The repeated evocation of narrative in the film suggests that the relationships between art and morality might insightfully be interrogated in a narrative. What is needed is a dramatized philosophical investigation, or a philosophical drama - what we find in *The Shape of Things*. As with Plato's dialogues, LaBute's drama discloses aspects of the struggle for normative supremacy between the moral and the artistic by laying bare the souls of the characters in the course of the spoken debate. LaBute's drama recalls the battle for authority between philosophy and poetry in Plato's *Republic*. LaBute follows Plato in offering an interrogative work of art, one that questions and arouses us to question without providing straightforward answers. As with Plato, rather than taking an explicit stance, LaBute stages the contest for predominance, not so much between the sexes, as between morality and art.

To summarize. Our interpretation of the film explores the relationship between art and morality through four themes: the tension between artistic and moral values; the moral content of art; the moral vice of aesthetic pride; and the moral significance narrative—both Evelyn's and LaBute's.

The Makeover Artist Snares Her Prey

The film begins in an art museum with an attractive, artsy-looking girl, Evelyn (Rachel Weisz), taking Polaroid photos of a classic, ancient sculpture. This may come to seem ironic, since Evelyn is an experimental artist, a devotee of performance art whose idea of sculpting is to reshape a human being. However, Evelyn is anything but a traditional art lover and we soon learn of her subversive intentions at the art museum. From the start, Evelyn breaks the rules. Not only is she taking forbidden photos, but she is violating the cordoned space around the sculpture. We will consider how much of the allure for Evelyn in what she does is found in breaking the rules and the extent to which the artist's role includes challenging the prevalent moral norms.

Adam (Paul Rudd), a part-time guard in the museum, scolds her, 'You stepped over the line.' Evelyn replies, 'That's why I did it.' 'You're not supposed to do that, or the photos,' Adam rejoins. LaBute here situates

his film (however temporarily) within the tradition of the romantic comedy. The attractiveness of a woman who enjoys violating conventional norms will soon be reinforced by another staple of the genre, her fighting with the protagonist's best friend.

Evelyn deflects Adam's criticism by thanking him for helping her at a video store where he worked, sometime in the past. Adam had helped her find a film version of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Grey*. The first reference to literature comes in the form of a movie based on a novel, which is itself about a painting. Evelyn will later argue that as Adam became more physically attractive his soul became uglier, just as Wilde's Dorian Grey remains handsome while his portrait morphs to reveal the corruption of his character. Morality provides the focus not only of Wilde's literary narrative, but in the narrative aspect of the painting of Dorian as well. Casually and subtly, LaBute points to the centrality of the moral in the artistic. Evelyn threatens to deface the statue with spray paint because she doesn't 'like art that isn't true.' The inartistic plaster leaf over the sculpture's genital area was added on, by a committee, no less. Although Evelyn rebels against society's starchy mores, she will reshape Adam into a more conventionally attractive male. In this respect, his makeover fits with what is presented in the television spectacles.

The fig leaf might also allude to classical depictions of Adam and Eve covering their sexuality when expelled from the Garden of Eden. Having eaten fruit from the tree of knowledge, the pair becomes self-conscious, including awareness of the sins of the flesh. Indeed, knowledge of what he is capable of doing, particularly to his friends, will later cause Adam shame; however, Evelyn seems shameless. She seems capable of rationalizing any action for the sake of art, including videotaping sex with Adam. Evelyn informs Adam that she is 'just getting started on her M.F.A. thesis project.' The information is the first of several clues that Evelyn gives as to what her real interest in Adam is all about.

Flirting with Adam, Evelyn sows the seeds of the makeover, telling him: 'You're cute. I don't like your hair.' When he asks whether he can call her, the hook has been properly set and Evelyn begins to reel him in. As with her biblical namesake, Evelyn tempts Adam and undermines his innocence. By the end of the movie he will no longer be the open, trusting, and trustworthy person whom we meet and like at the start of the story.

When Evelyn tells Adam that he can call her, she insinuates that he is already somewhat responsible for what is to befall him by questioning whether he's allowed to 'hit on' patrons. Adam has himself yielded to the temptation to break a museum rule, and Evelyn takes pleasure in his compromising the moral high ground at the outset. Adam walks off looking at the inside of his jacket where Evelyn has spray-painted her phone number, as though she has branded him her property.

Besides linking the film's characters with the biblical Adam and Eve, the dialogue connects the couple to the classical narrative of the sculptor and his sculpture. Calling Evelyn 'Henry Higgins,' Adam humbly acknowledges that he is playing Eliza Doolittle to Evelyn's linguist Higgins in *Pygmalion*, George Bernard Shaw's modern take on the Greek Myth. In the original story, Pygmalion's sculpture, Galatea, comes to life, becoming human. In Shaw's play, Higgins makes over a lower class woman to demonstrate his mastery of language and phonetics, as well as the predominance of linguistic presentation over social history. Although fairly obvious, the double comparison is illuminating for several reasons, on several levels.

The Greek myth indicates that the artist loves his creation. Pygmalion sculpts his beautiful Galatea out of marble only to fall in love with her when she comes to life. Now this can be seen as a form of narcissism (yet another Greek myth) because Galatea is the result of Pygmalion's talent whereby he has externalized aspects of his own personality and imagination. In the case of Henry Higgins, he is working on material that is already human and alive, making Eliza Doolittle over into the simulacrum of a lady. As with Evelyn, Henry is not just playing with the outward speech and carriage of Eliza, but with her heart as well. Yet Henry too falls under the spell of his own creation, however much she had been formed before he came on the scene.

We will see that Evelyn is unlike Pygmalion and Henry Higgins. She never comes to love the creature into which she molds Adam. Perhaps she is too detached, too cold and calculating. We can ask whether this is a flaw in an artist or a human being. Nevertheless, Evelyn also resembles each of her predecessors. Like Pygmalion, Evelyn sees herself as sculpting and her material is unaware of being worked upon by an artist. And Evelyn is also similar to Higgins, insofar as she reshapes a person, material that already has a form and consciousness.

His mention of Henry Higgins indicates Adam's awareness of what Evelyn is doing to him, putting it in the context of a literary narrative. But, noticeably, Evelyn claims not to get the reference. Evelyn may simply not know very much about the history of the literary arts, as she appears to miss other literary allusions later in the story. If she is indeed ignorant, then the film may be indicating a shallowness and self-absorption on Evelyn's part. Perhaps she is eager to experiment with new art forms but with no grounding in the classics or basics. Is this why the result, the film may be asking, seems so contrived and, in the end, nasty?

On the other hand, Evelyn may be just pretending not to know who Henry Higgins is. But why? Perhaps to throw Adam off the scent and keep him from thinking through the possibility that Evelyn is imitating Henry Higgins down to using Adam to prove a point. Where Higgins demonstrates to a colleague that by overhauling a street girl's diction and

elocation he can pass her off as a lady, Evelyn's goal is to display the artistry by which she makes Adam into her creation

Moral Fallout: Friendship, Taste, and Conquering the Body

Sometime later, Evelyn and Adam get together with Adam's friends, Phil (Frederick Weller) and Jenny (Gretchen Mol), at the engaged couple's apartment. The convivial evening is disrupted when Phil scoffs at the unknown individual who spray painted a nude in the museum. Evelyn becomes hostile. She never admits to the group that she is responsible for painting the sculpture, but surely Adam guesses. Phil is smug about his opinion that painting a penis over the plaster leaf is pornographic garbage. Evelyn defends the act as making a 'statement,' claiming that it cannot be pornography since it is not meant to titillate. When Evelyn says that Phil is the 'obnoxious type,' he lashes back, asking Evelyn who she thinks she is to tell him who he is. Phil perceptively identifies Evelyn as someone who wishes to define people, exactly her project with Adam.

After telling Adam that he 'can really pick 'em,' Phil turns to shoot a Nerf-ball and mutters 'statement' in a derogatory way. Evelyn yells, 'Just shut the fuck up,' and gives Phil a running shove in the back, knocking him to the floor. She barks, 'Fuck right off. How would you know!' Phil wonders how Evelyn knew that it was a woman who sprayed the statue. Evelyn leaves the apartment of Adam's friends in a huff, sarcastically wishing Jen good luck with Phil. Phil calls Evelyn a bitch and asks Adam whether Evelyn has made him her 'puppy.'

The altercation with Phil indicates that Evelyn can get violent about differences of artistic opinion. Although Phil is as self-assured and opinionated as Evelyn, we may be surprised that Evelyn, the artist, is so intolerant of views that differ from her own. The image of her as closed-minded is soon reinforced, even as she defends art that is itself questioning and provocative. After a session of love-making (photographed by Evelyn), she asks Adam if he enjoyed the performance art they recently saw. Adam finds the female artist removing her tampon lacking in aesthetic qualities. Evelyn defends the performance, saying that 'it's an expression of herself - as an artist, as a person.' Adam snaps that he 'got it' (the point of the performance) and defends not liking it: 'Maybe it's because she was painting portraits of her daddy using menstrual blood.' When Evelyn replies that the artist is 'completely influential,' Adam argues that it was too private, and that 'it's called theatre, not therapy.' As with Phil, Evelyn gets angry when Adam disagrees with her aesthetic assessment, berating Adam for having taste 'up [his] ass.'

The scene calls attention to the moral office and character of the artist. First is the notion that the artist has the responsibility of challenging our usual ways of perceiving and conceiving the world. The view that it is morally good to see things afresh is one that Evelyn obviously embraces,

evidenced in her defence of the performance artist and in her own protest against the phony fig-leaf at the museum. Society would be impoverished without art that pushed us to re-examine the conventional norms and beliefs we uncritically accept. And this is why Evelyn's own impatience with Adam and Phil for challenging her judgment and taste is problematic. Surely someone who thinks that art should question our habitual modes of seeing and thinking should be open to opposition to her own taste?

Evelyn's imperious manner also suggests an intimate connection between the moral and the aesthetic in the realm of character: the blending of a moral vice with an aesthetic flaw. She demonstrates an aesthetically weighted moral defect - a species of artistic hubris. An overweening pride in her aesthetic taste causes Evelyn to be impatient and harsh with Phil and Adam when they dispute her judgment. What differentiates this vice from other forms of pride is its distinctively aesthetic content and consequences, as it closes the individual off to values and views at variance with her own. To have this moral-aesthetic failing one need not be an artist, since it is an overestimation of one's aesthetic judgment, not one's artistic ability. For another example of such an aesthetic immorality, consider someone whose aesthetic appreciation of a story or painting is enhanced by the valorization of racism or cruelty in the work. Indeed, something like this animates Chad in *In the Company of Men*. Delight in his manipulative machinations, a kind of aesthetic design and performance, is augmented by the cruelty visited upon his victim, Christine. LaBute has uncovered and homed in on a subtle perversity of human character, one which is a compound of moral and aesthetic defect.

The scene also speaks to the socially entrenched gendered view of the mind-body division, what we might call the cultural narrative of woman as body. Disputing critics of LaBute who find him devoid of moral perspective, Dawn Keetley argues that the writer-director shares Nathaniel Hawthorne's moral rejection of an enduring phallocentric ideal: to conquer nature, emblemized in the (often female) body, for the sake of such higher ends as knowledge, perfection or creative power. Comparing Hawthorne's story 'The Birthmark' with *The Shape of Things*, Keetley claims that Evelyn's makeover of Adam actually attacks the 'longstanding western association of men with transcendence of the body and women with a thoroughgoing and sexualized embodiment' (2010, 17).

Keetley argues that both LaBute's Evelyn and Hawthorne's Alymer (a scientist) 'strive to shape those they pretend to love, and both rather disingenuously claim that their motives for experiments... are disinterested' (2010, 18). The two characters are in fact self-interested, pursuing the grandiose dream of transcending the body by bending it to their own creative and scientific abilities. We might incidentally note that this could also be a subtext of the many makeover television shows mentioned, namely,

that the audience subconsciously vibrates to the possibility of human mastery of our all-too fragile flesh.

If Keetley is correct, then LaBute is inverting the traditional gender roles, as illustrated by Hawthorne's male Alymer. In doing so, he would seem to be saying that the drive to transcend the body in a god-like manner is not the exclusive preserve of men. Here Keetley concedes that the conversation about the female artist painting in menstrual blood cuts against Evelyn's rejection of the body in favor of such loftier goals as creative expression. Evelyn's defense of the artistic use of woman's sexuality, especially secretions, would seem to align her with the body and its functions.

However, Keetley should not so readily compromise or soften her claim that Evelyn represents subjugating the body as a display of artistic prowess. Evelyn vehemently defends the female body and its secretions *qua art*, whereas Adam says that it is 'private.' As a public exhibit woman's body and blood are, on my interpretation, transformed into something else by the power of the artist. In Keetley's perspective, they are no longer threatening, with their dark forces or with their inevitable decay and dissolution. Evelyn resembles the avant-garde menstrual artist when she photographs and films her sexual interactions with Adam. In both cases, the (female) artist has herself symbolically triumphed over the (female) body by transforming it into art. Evelyn persists, therefore, as LaBute's stand-in for all the men who have sought to transcend bodily force and limitation by reshaping the (typically female) body. As Keetley remarks, the film consistently figures Evelyn as masculine, associating her explicitly with such male characters as Dr. Victor Frankenstein, Henry Higgins, and Othello.

Evelyn and Adam end their argument the way they preceded it, with lovemaking. Evelyn beckons her boy with a crook of her index finger. She has rigged up a video camera to tape their sexual coupling, telling Adam to smile into the camera. We see them through the video lens, Adam smiling as Evelyn disappears down by his crotch. Evelyn is in charge, in every way.

A subplot involves the mutual attraction that Adam and Jen have long felt for each other but have never acted on. Adam's makeover and relationship with Evelyn make him more attractive to Jen, reminiscent of the hopes of the contestants in the various television shows. Meeting at Jen's instigation, she tells Adam that he is 'getting cuter by the day,' and kisses him. He clutches her and returns the kiss. When Phil later finds out about the passionate tryst, he is angry, calling Adam 'Romeo.' But Phil seems more incensed by Adam's compliance in changing to suit Evelyn, including discarding the corduroy jacket that Phil long despised for a spiffier one. Shoving turns to tussling and then wrestling on the ground. Adam becomes physical with his old friends, kissing and fighting, as he metamorphoses.

Indeed, he will later allude to Kafka's novella, telling Evelyn that he has 'a Gregor Samsa thing going,' yet another narrative reference.

Adam has lost weight, revamped his hair style, stopped biting his nails and replaced his dorky glasses with contact lenses. Evelyn next persuades him to have a nose-job. Waiting for a consultation with the plastic surgeon, Evelyn falsely claims to have had a nose-job herself to ease Adam's misgivings. To Adam's observation that he can't detect the surgery, Evelyn replies, 'That's the point.' When Evelyn tells him the surgery is cosmetic, not corrective, Adam jokes, 'Well, if it's cosmetic, maybe I should just put some powder on it.' Evelyn doesn't even smile, let alone laugh, at this funny line. Seemingly without a sense of humour, she is presented as taking herself and her art too seriously. Much avant-garde art, including some performance art, has a playful quality - Dadaism being a paradigmatic case. Adam conceals kissing Jen from Evelyn and lies to Phil about the surgery, claiming that he had banged his nose accidentally. As with the biblical Adam, the film's character loses innocence about sexuality and fidelity, both separately and conjointly. Why conceal such details unless ashamed or embarrassed by them?

Adam joins Evelyn in a coffee shop, surprised to find Jen there as well. Inviting Jen is part of Evelyn's staging of the scene. She makes Adam and Jen squirm by revealing that she knows about their kiss, having talked with Phil. Evelyn says that she 'kissed Phillip, to get even.' After Jen leaves in a huff, Adam becomes self-righteous, criticizing Evelyn for her treatment of Jen. Evelyn says that she only kissed Phil for the effect. 'For the effect' could well be Evelyn's mantra, as it often motivates her actions: crossing the cordoned line at the museum, spray painting the statue, and orchestrating Adam's extreme makeover. Evelyn proceeds to defend her behavior by going on the attack, scolding Adam for lying about his nose job.

Evelyn then changes gears and asks Adam if he's tired of her, presumably for kissing Jenny. Adam tosses out another literary allusion that appears to escape Evelyn. He says, 'Next you're gonna tell me that the handkerchief with the strawberries is missing.' Recall that Desdemona drops such a handkerchief later used by Iago to sow seeds of jealousy in Othello, her husband. Ever the master manipulator, Iago wishes to destroy the relationships Othello enjoys with Desdemona and his lieutenant, Cassio - just as Evelyn comes between Adam and his best friends. However, in his reference, Adam is implying that Evelyn is becoming jealous of Adam's affection for Jen, as though she were Othello (and not Iago). But Evelyn is merely feigning jealousy for effect, putting Othello's fatal passion to an Iago-like use.

Adam then yields all power to Evelyn, saying: 'I'll do anything you want... I don't want to lose you... I love you.' Adam unhappily but readily accedes to Evelyn's demand that he give up Phil and Jen as friends. Her

control of him is complete. Adam has changed his appearance for Evelyn and now has exchanged his dearest friends for her, at her command. Instead of wielding a sculptor's chisel, like Pygmalion, Evelyn manipulates her living material in the manner of Iago, using desire and fear of loss as her primary tools.

Makeover Revealed and Art Justified

Phil and Adam meet awkwardly before Evelyn's presentation of her M.F.A. project, and Adam learns that Jen has called off the wedding. Phil says, 'The ring's off. Took her CDs back.' People are gathered in a darkened hall and Evelyn comes into the spotlight. Reversing Jen's removal of her engagement ring, Evelyn puts on a diamond ring and disingenuously informs the audience that she will soon have an answer for her suitor. Adam looks on, eagerly, expectantly, little suspecting that the declined marriage proposal will be the final touch of his total humiliation.

Evelyn then tells the audience that her project is a human sculpture that she has worked on for eighteen weeks. She has purposely left the piece untitled because she hopes it will mean something different to each person. The sculpture involves two materials of choice: human flesh and human will. Evelyn's challenge was to instill a certain amount of change without compromising Adam's free will. She says, 'I found that with the right coaxing... I could hone the inside of my sculpture as well as the surface.' Evelyn stresses that as Adam became more attractive his actions became morally suspect, such as kissing his friend's fiancée and then renouncing both these friends.

At these revelations, first Jen, and then Phil, leave in disgust. LaBute employs the surprise revelation in both his films of emotional subterfuge. Besides providing a sudden jolt, the device situates the viewer in the same dramatic space as the characters who are victims of Evelyn's manipulation, producing an immediate identification with these characters, however temporary. The film thus engages in a parallel manipulation of us, perhaps to strengthen our moral response, but possibly simply to demonstrate its power. Cinema is itself an art form, capable of reshaping its audience in diverse ways.

Evelyn's project consists in a variety of ingredients. Besides the outward and inward alterations she has wrought in Adam, it also includes the methods she used, and a collection of artefacts such as Adam's old corduroy jacket. As with the standard makeover show, Evelyn presents before and after photos of Adam. He finally storms off when Evelyn says that she cannot accept his offer of marriage. She concludes by solemnly intoning, 'There is... only art.' Affirming that the values and claims of art take precedence over all others, upends the traditional view outlined in Section I: the presumption in favor of moral values over the demands of prudence, economics, society or art.

As mentioned, the film operates on several levels with regard to the relationship between art and morality. First, there is the moral content of art. The movie playfully shows how Evelyn's own behavior and narrative account of that behavior undermine her proclamation that 'moralists have no place in an art gallery.' Even in the extreme examples offered by Evelyn, art addresses morality. For instance, when she spray paints the vulgar plaster leaf covering the statue's sex organs, Evelyn claims to be making a statement - condemning the bourgeois morality that is offended by nudity. Clearly, morality falls within the purview of art and artistic protest in Evelyn's own performance. Evelyn also includes moral content in the narrative of her human sculpture, noting that as Adam became more outwardly attractive, his behaviour became 'more [morally] questionable.' He violates bonds of friendship by kissing Jen, is deceptive about the violation, and lies about his nose job.

Then, too, Evelyn attempts to defend her human sculpting on moral grounds, saying that she never 'forced' her subject to do anything, illustrating a second relationship between the moral and the artistic: the moral status of the means used to create the art. Although she boasts that there is only art, Evelyn seems to be accepting moral limits to the artist's actions. Yet Evelyn's argument in her own defence, moreover, is on ground as shaky as the justification offered by the devious men of *In the Company of Men*. Her defence that she did not force Adam to do anything is unconvincing. Does she think that force requires putting a gun to Adam's head or drugging him? Evelyn has knowingly deprived Adam of agency—the moral capacity of self-governance. Evelyn uses manipulation, deception and finally coercion: threatening loss of her love unless Adam severs his friendships with Jen and Phil. As a violation of autonomy, such behavior is typically grouped with force as wrongful unless strong countervailing moral reasons exist. The film asks us to consider whether creating art is important enough to override the moral strictures against depriving individuals of agency.

The question of whether the production of art can justify otherwise immoral behavior has a provocative philosophical pedigree. Michael Slote (1983) and Bernard Williams (1982) before him argue that sometimes an action that appears to be immoral can turn out to be morally justified because of the salutary consequences of the act. Both Slote and Williams offer Gauguin as an instructive example, arguing that abandoning his wife and children was justified by the fact that he produced great art. Presumably, the art would not have been created had he honoured his moral commitments to wife and children. These philosophers weigh the apparent immorality of Gauguin's domestic betrayal against its aesthetic fruits, and arrive at a moral conclusion - one which exonerates the artist from wrongdoing.

Williams and Slote compare the obvious immorality of an act with its (ultimate) aesthetic payoff and then reach a *moral* judgment, as if the aesthetic possessed moral worth. Although this is not identical with the modest interpretation of Eveyln's position, that art takes priority over the moral (or at least the conventional morality exemplified in covering the genitalia of statues), it is certainly of a piece with it. On the philosophical view used to defend Gauguin, Evelyn's mistreatment of Adam would be morally justified just in case her art is worthwhile.

The Shape of Things prompts us to consider whether this is true, but not necessarily to accept its veracity. Of course there looms the slippery slope. How far would Williams or Slote go before condemning Gauguin's behaviour as wrongful? Would they countenance mutilation or murder for the illustrious Gauguin, or family abandonment for a painter who achieved less? In Evelyn's case, even if her quasi-performance art is praiseworthy, would it justify maiming or killing Adam? These sorts of casuistical questions should make us wonder how weighing the moral against the aesthetic is supposed to proceed.

Slote and Williams seem to be offering a utilitarian argument in support of Gauguin. For the utilitarian, all values and disvalues are to be aggregated and then compared. If the overall utility of the act outweighs its disutility (and the net gain of alternative acts), the act is the morally correct choice. As such aggregation and calculation encompass all goods, including the artistic, no incommensurability between the moral and the aesthetic should arise. Nevertheless, the old vexing questions return *within* the utilitarian perspective. How to weigh the harm done to Adam against the value of Evelyn's artistic project? The film implies that we viewers are in the same situation as the audience for Evelyn's concluding presentation: left to rely, in the end, on our own sense of moral boundaries, boundaries to which Evelyn herself appeals. However, we should be skeptical about comparing the relative values of the artistic and the moral in the first place, at least when the immorality involves grievous violations of personal agency or well-being. What of all the would-be Gauguins who betrayed their domestic responsibilities or otherwise did serious wrong for the sake of their art but were artistic flops? Surely their actions were wrong and just as surely were Gauguin's as well. His artistic talent did not justify his conduct; rather, we are glad he did the wrong thing, in retrospect, because we are happy to have his art. If we are persuaded that Gauguin is off the moral hook, it is because we confuse aesthetic appreciation after the fact with moral justification of the act.

To see the error of thinking that Gauguin's artistic success exonerates him from wrong-doing, consider a hypothetical case: an armed robber knocks Jones unconscious and takes his wallet. Jones is brought to a hospital to treat his concussion and, as a result, cannot go to work at the Twin Towers on the day they are decimated. His life is spared because of

the robber's actions; however, this does not justify the robber's behavior. The injury was just a lucky 'break,' in no way removing the stain of wrongdoing from the assailant. The rightness or wrongness of an act cannot depend on accidental features of circumstances. If it did, then the reverse of the Jones case would also be true. If we saved someone from drowning and he subsequently murdered ten people, our act would have been wrongful. Such a conclusion seems dubious, at best.

In cases of truly magnificent art, such as Gauguin's, we are tempted to exculpate the artist from wrong-doing but only because we have confused a fortunate outcome with a justification for wrong action. We can appreciate the art without pronouncing every act that was necessary for it morally permissible. Evelyn's justification for violating Adam's autonomy and causing him emotional pain, therefore, should be unconvincing even if her art were wonderful.

Narrative and Morality

Let us conclude by returning to narrative as a trope and the relevance of morality to it. In Section II we broached the idea that LaBute is urging us to scrutinize the narrative that Evelyn imposes on Adam and his friends. The morally questionable nature of Evelyn's narrative is most palpable and glaring simply on the grounds of deceit, manipulation and the ensuing harm. She leads Adam on and leads him to believe that they have a future together, so much so that Adam offers Evelyn his grandmother's engagement ring only to be devastated at Evelyn's public revelation. With the help of Keetley's analysis, we can criticize Evelyn's narrative from a still broader perspective. Keetley's analysis implies that Evelyn is re-enacting a more pervasive and enduring cultural narrative: the narrative of subduing the body by subjecting it to our transformative talents.

Quite apart from the harm done to Adam, then, Evelyn's narrative of extreme makeover is damaging from a cultural point of view. It diminishes our connection with and respect for our bodies - the celebration of ourselves as embodied beings. Evelyn's M.F.A. project is not simply Adam's makeover. It is the makeover and Evelyn's account of it, the narrative she offers during the climactic scene of the film. Without the meaning supplied by such a narrative, the changes wrought in Adam would be little more than a series of brute facts. They require a narrative to have significance. Although Evelyn thinks that her project is a transgressive piece of performance art, Keetley's view suggests that it is actually regressive, merely inverting the oft-told fantasy of male dominance over human form. But if we are to come away from the movie suspicious of Evelyn's narrative in both the personal and cultural spheres, we may perhaps take heart from the moral upshot of the narrative implications of the film as a whole. Recall how LaBute's story positions us in the same narrative space that Evelyn places Adam and his friends. The cinematic structure of *The Shape of*

Things thereby renders imminent Evelyn's narrative of the power of art. Disclosing the claims and dangers of art in their immediacy, the film harkens us to Plato's warning about the persuasive charms of narrative. By focusing on the artist as creator of illusion, LaBute calls attention to the artifice in art, especially narrative, in a way he did not in *In the Company of Men*. At the same time, of course, LaBute is himself presenting a different sort of narrative within which the relationships between art and morality are interrogated. The adroitness of LaBute is to have raised these normative questions within a work of art, by fashioning a philosophical narrative that provokes reflection rather than supplying ready answers.

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